



490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT
406-752-5501

DECISION NOTICE
Wayfarers State Park
Improvement Project

July 10, 2014

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT

Montana State Parks (MSP), a division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, is proposing to complete facility improvements at Wayfarers State Park. The improvements would take place in two phases as funding allows. Phase I consists of the construction of a ranger station in the Harry Horn day use area, demolition of the outdated and deteriorating Harry Horn restroom and development of a seasonal park host site in its place, and the enlargement of the existing park maintenance and storage building in its present location.

Phase II, to be completed in 2016-17, or when funding is available, consists of constructing a new picnic shelter in the day use area near the lake and the addition of up to 10 parking spaces in the existing day use parking adjacent to the site.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Alternative A: No Action - MSP does not make any changes to Wayfarers State Park.

The primary advantage of the no-action alternative is the cost savings for infrastructure and facility improvements. The Flathead Lake State Park manager and much of the park's staff would continue to commute from the Regional Headquarters office building in Kalispell.

Visitor services would remain at the current levels as would staffing levels for seasonal park hosts in spite of continually growing annual visitation.

The existing public restroom at the Harry Horn day use area would not be replaced and thus would continue to provide marginal access to people with physical disabilities.

Finally, MSP would not construct a picnic shelter and associated parking spaces within the Wayfarers day use area.

Alternative B: MSP proceeds with all improvements as proposed, locating the ranger station to the south side of the entrance road in the Harry Horn day use area.

Under this alternative MSP would construct a ranger station, with an attached public restroom, on the south side of the entrance road between the existing playground and entrance booth.

The ranger station would house an office for the park manager and park ranger, thus becoming their duty station. The ranger station would include a small visitor information area to provide information about recreational opportunities on Flathead Lake and the surrounding communities.

The existing restroom located to the north of the park's entrance station would be replaced with a host site on which an additional park host could park an RV for the summer months to assist with park operations.

Under Phase II of this alternative, a second and smaller picnic shelter would be constructed in the day use area of Wayfarers to accommodate the high demand for a group use facility closer to the water. The upper day use parking area will be modified to provide space for up to 10 vehicles.

Finally, the existing park maintenance building would be increased in size in its existing location to better accommodate maintenance operations for Flathead Lake State Park units.

The project as proposed would result in better access by visitors to park staff, provide for quicker, more effective response to issues regarding information, safety, and facility conditions, and improve the efficiency of park operations and management.

The primary advantage to this alternative is that the facility would be located in an area of the park that has ample parking and would not interfere with traffic flow into and out of the park.

The primary disadvantage to this alternative is the added expense of getting utilities to the ranger station building site.

Alternative C: MSP proceeds with improvements as proposed, locating the Ranger Station to the north side of the entrance road in the Harry Horn day use area.

All facets of Alternative C are identical to Alternative B with exception of the location of the ranger station and public restroom. Under this alternative, the ranger station would be placed on the north side of the park's entrance road, between the existing entrance booth and the junction with US Hwy 35. This alternative would require striping and additional traffic control features to blend traffic flow between the ranger station and the entrance booth.

The primary advantage to this alternative is the reduced cost of construction due to the proximity of the ranger station building site to existing utilities.

The primary disadvantage is the potential for reduced visitor safety due to traffic flow problems and congestion during peak use days.

PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENT

MSP staff met with members of the Community Foundation for a Better Bigfork in February 2014 to share the initial concept plan for this project. Utilizing input from that meeting, MSP staff developed a draft environmental assessment (EA) for the project and released it for public review and comment on May 5, 2014. Written public comment was accepted through June 9, 2014. During the public review period, MSP held an informational meeting on June 20 at Bethany Lutheran Church in Bigfork, which was attended by 17 people. The draft EA review period was advertised through news releases, web site postings, and several legal advertisements in area newspapers. Personal contacts were also made by park staff with the Horn family and with adjoining neighbors to inform them of the proposal and comment period.

MSP received ten written responses during the public comment period. The following is a summary of comments and MSP responses:

Comments in support of the proposal or specific elements of the proposal:

- I use Wayfarer and Harry Horn 4 - 5 times a week and appreciate both parks each time I walk or jog thru there. My support is for Alternative B.
- The proposals seemed very reasonable, with some modification. If the discussed plan is adopted, it will be a win-win situation for the parks, the community, and visitors to the area. Hopefully, this will also put an end to attempts to modify the wishes of the Horn family permanently. Their generous donation of this land for the benefit of tourists and Bigfork alike should not be tampered with.
- Covered Day Use Picnic Area at Lake: This is good -- the lake could use a covered area for those days when the weather is inclement and for rentals.
- I would urge the selection of Alternative B: MSP proceeds with all improvements as proposed, locating the ranger station to the south side of the entrance road in the Harry Horn day use area. Many park agencies, including the National Park Service, develop parks by making visitor contact and administrative facilities the first priority for funding and development to prevent many of the situations described in the EA. This long-needed project will not only address these issues, but will also enhance the visitor experience. The Alternative B location for the Ranger Station/Visitor Center is the only safe alternative. Safety and visitor experience dictates that the do-nothing Alternative A and Alternative C are both unacceptable.
- A Group Picnic Shelter near the lake has also long been needed. The Shelter at Harry Horn would never have been built away from the lake except for local politics.

Comments that are in opposition to the proposal or specific elements of the proposal:

- Most of the other items heavily discussed in the Draft Environmental Assessment seem to be problems with personnel management. I don't think that having a building on-site will be a solution to a lack of training, supervision, personnel scheduling, and regularly scheduled maintenance. Also, I don't see a need for any off-season staffing at the site since the park does not operate then, as with most other state parks.

MSP Response:

Currently the Flathead Lake State Park manager, who manages five state parks on the Lake, has a duty station in Kalispell. By moving that duty station to Wayfarers State Park, the most heavily visited state park on the lake, supervision and park operations become more efficient. In short, the time and money spent traveling to and from Kalispell can be redirected to park operations.

In 2013, estimated combined visitation for all of the state park units on Flathead Lake was 257,548. While the majority of those visits occurred between May 1 and September 30, an estimated 44,000 visits occurred between October 1 and April 30. All of the state park

units on Flathead Lake but Finley Point State Park remain open year-round, and routine maintenance and site presence is required to serve visitors and deter vandalism.

- I DO support the new group picnic shelter nearer the lake shore and expanded parking in the upper day use area. But, at this point the only option I can fully support is Option A - No Action.
- Improve the bathroom facilities and add on to the bathroom structure with a ranger office and storage. We do not need a VISITOR CENTER. That is what the campground hosts are to provide for the state park. This is cheaper and allows for a ranger office, with bathrooms already there at the office (why should tax dollars go to a new structure with a bathroom when there bathrooms with septic setups just across the road?).

MSP Response:

Based on public input, restroom facilities would be included with the ranger station. This would provide a much higher level of access for people of limited mobility than the existing restrooms on the Harry Horn side of the park. The ranger station would include office space for the Flathead Lake State Park manager and ranger. It would also include a small visitor information area, as opposed to a visitor center like those at other state parks, that would provide a location to display printed materials and information about Flathead Lake State Parks and the surrounding communities. This space would also be used to provide information regarding the Horn family and their history with the site. Volunteers can assist with distributing visitor information during peak use periods when park hosts are occupied with traffic control, maintenance, and campsite reservations.

- HOST Station at Playground: This is a very bad location. The host site needs to be near the other campers. This location is too far removed from campers. It would probably be nice for the hosts, but not a good location for the hosts to be accessible to the other campers.

MSP Response:

The proposed host site would be placed near the park's entrance on the opposite side of the road from the playground and would not replace the two existing host sites near the campground. Construction of an additional host site near the entrance would allow for more volunteer assistance at the entrance booth during the increasingly busy peak summer season, and would provide a presence at the entrance of the park to deliver visitor service and deter after-hours vandalism in the Harry Horn day use area. The host site would also provide an additional staff presence near the playground for added security.

Comments that were neither supportive nor non-supportive:

- Considering that the design plans are only 25% complete, and with no construction plans prepared yet, how do you know what the final cost/estimate will be? If the project comes in over what you have funding for, who will pay the difference? Also, in any of this, will there be any cost to county residents?

MSP Response:

MSP has budgeted \$344,000 based on estimates developed by the Department's design and construction team. A number of variables affect project costs when a project goes to bid, but MSP must operate within budget. Montana State Parks does not receive any county funding for construction projects.

- I agree that some of these improvements would be very nice to have and would enhance the Wayfarer's experience. However, since you only have the land available at Harry Horn Park due to a bequest by the Horn family specifically for a Day Use Area and Playground, I don't think that it's your right to make other use of that area.
- As to the location of the visitors' center, park host site and restrooms within HHP, my recommendation would be for Dave Landstrom and Jerry Sawyer to confer with Rick Horn as the current representative for Harry's wishes. If Rick supports the most recent modifications, then I, too, endorse them.

MSP Response:

MSP staff have communicated with the Horn family regarding the proposal, and the family spokesperson has provided support for Alternative B.

- Generally speaking, I like the division between the Harry Horn day use area at the entrance of the park and the camping and lakeshore access on the lake side of the park. This division allows for locals to have a quiet place to park and hike the trails, picnic, and enjoy the state park without having to tangle in the commotion found at the lake. It's a quiet refuge. As a mother of a toddler, I very much like the playground and miss the swings. PLEASE BRING BACK SWINGS!

MSP Response:

MSP intends to maintain the quiet setting that exists presently at Harry Horn Park. All of the existing playground equipment, including the swing set, will remain regardless of the proposal outcome.

Comments for improvements beyond the scope of the current proposal:

I would like to suggest making a wheelchair-accessible trail on to the top of the rock section.

I can't believe this is all the 'improvements' we are getting to Wayfarer's Park!! You should just call it Harry Horn improvements!! It will still have a poor swimming area and very few picnic tables for day use by the lake.

Something that I would like as an upgrade and I know everyone would love is the hole to be made deeper at the big rock to jump off of. That would be so awesome!

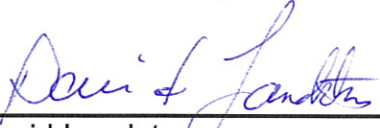
DECISION

Taking into consideration the valuable and heartfelt input from park users, neighbors, community leaders, and the Horn family, I have selected Alternative B, to develop a ranger station with public restrooms on the south side of the park's entrance road. MSP will also proceed with converting the existing Harry Horn public restrooms to a seasonal park host site and will enlarge the existing park maintenance shop in its current location. Phase II, a day use picnic shelter and associated parking, will be conducted in 2016 or beyond if funding is available. I have selected Alternative B for two primary reasons:


- 1) Visitor safety is best served by directing ranger station traffic away from the busy entrance booth.
- 2) Alternative B places the ranger station in an area that provides the greatest amount of vegetative buffering from neighboring private properties, while simultaneously providing a visible and inviting amenity for visitors entering or leaving the park.

Based on the analysis in the draft EA and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, I have determined that the proposed action will not have significant effects on the human or physical environment. Therefore an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

This action is subject to appeal, which must be submitted to the FWP State Parks Division Administrator in writing and postmarked within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must specifically describe the basis for the appeal, explain how the appellant has previously commented to the Department or participated in the decision-making process, and how FWP might address the concerns of the appeal.



David Landstrom
Region One State Parks Manager
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



Date